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Jane Grabhorn

THE COLT PRESS

An Interview Conducted by

Ruth Teiser

Berkeley  
1966



Jane Grabhorn 1954



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## INTRODUCTION

Jane Grabhorn was born Martha Jane Bissell in San Francisco on June 29, 1911. In 1932 she was married to Robert Grabhorn, principal with his brother Edwin in the illustrious Grabhorn Press. As she narrates in this interview, she began working at the Grabhorn Press in 1934, doing a variety of jobs which ranged from hand binding some books to maintaining mailing lists and wrapping packages.

In 1938 Jane Grabhorn and William M. Roth started the Colt Press, the independent commercial publishing venture which reached its climax in 1941 with the publication of McTeague. The Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Typographic Work of Jane Grabhorn, published on the occasion of a retrospective exhibit at Stanford University in 1956, lists all books published under the Colt Press imprint to that date. It also contains an essay on the Colt Press by William M. Roth, giving credit to Jane Grabhorn as the leader of the enterprise who "did all the work."

As is apparent in this interview, Jane Grabhorn is a woman of strong ideas, vigorous humor, and occasional



flights of hyperbole. She tends to minimize her talents. The interview was held in an upstairs work room at the Grabhorn Press, characteristically arranged with superficial carelessness but esthetically irreproachable, full of books, paintings, prints, objects of art.

The date of the interview was December 15, 1965. It was the day after the death of Harold Seeger, whose involvement in the Colt Press is described by Mrs. Grabhorn. It was less than a fortnight before the dissolution of the Grabhorn Press in the last week of 1965.

References in the interview to "here" are, of course, the Grabhorn Press at its location of many years, 1335 Sutter Street near Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco. "Bob" is Robert Grabhorn. "Bill" is William M. Roth except where William Bissell, Mrs. Grabhorn's brother is specifically mentioned. The book referred to near the close of the interview, the volume written by Franklin Walker for the Book Club of California, was not done after all by the Colt Press because of the dissolution of the Grabhorn Press.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons prominent in recent California history. The Office is under the direction of Mrs. Willa Baum, and under the administrative



supervision of Professor A. Hunter Dupree, Director of The Bancroft Library. Past interviews by the Office which may supplement the material covered in this interview have been done with Brother Antoninus, Warren Howell, Albert Sperisen, Edward deWitt Taylor, and Adrian Wilson and others are underway in the fields of literature, publishing, and printing.

Ruth Teiser  
Interviewer

15 March 1966

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE JUMBO PRESS	1
BEGINNING OF THE COLT PRESS	5
PARTICIPANTS AND FRIENDS	10
EDITORIAL CONSIDERATIONS	13
BINDING AND TYPESETTING	18
PRODUCTION EAST AND WEST	24
ECONOMICS OF FINE BOOK PRINTING	30
PARTIAL INDEX	40



## THE JUMBO PRESS

Teiser: I want to ask you first a little about your Jumbo Press. That preceded the Colt Press chronologically, didn't it?

Grabhorn: Yes. The Jumbo stopped when the Colt Press started, except for things that I might have done from time to time as a Valentine or something like that for my own fun.

Teiser: Your Jumbo work was always done at the Grabhorn Press?

Grabhorn: Yes. I always did it all. That is why it is so funny looking. I would not let anybody touch those. I wanted no slickness there at all, and it didn't have it either.

Teiser: Did you know anything about printing first-hand before you married Bob Grabhorn?

Grabhorn: No, not a blessed thing. I didn't for quite a while. When I found out that I could not have any children, I decided that I had to do something. Housework doesn't take very long. We used to have dinner with the senior Grabhorns every Sunday night. Dr. Robertson was still alive, and they lived in Greenwich Court. One night Ed said, "Why don't you come down and work for us?" I seized upon the idea. I thought, "Well,



Grabhorn: that would really not be work. It would be fun." So it wasn't for quite a while--we were walking along Kearny Street, Bob and I, on our way to the shop. In this window there was a little tiny press. You still see them from time to time--to print your own calling cards and stuff like that. It was called the Jumbo press. I said, "I would like to buy that." It had a little case of type. He said, "Why the hell don't you set type at the shop. You have all the type and presses in the world."

So that is what gave me my first idea. I would work all day Saturday when Bob was visiting George Fields. We all worked Saturday mornings then. Then Saturday after lunch he would spend the afternoon with George Fields and I would stay on at Commercial Street and play. Far from being the way it is now, the Grovers [Sherwood and Trina] were given strict instructions to help me with nothing, so that is why there is all that funny spacing. They were not even supposed to show me where anything was. I'd rattle around picking up this piece of type and that. I was not shown how to set a stick or anything. Those were heavenly days for me. I turned out that first



Grabhorn: Jumbo Press book and then the second, and just gave them away, delighted that anyone would want them.

Teiser: How long before the beginning of the Colt Press idea had you actually been working with the Grabhorn Press?

Grabhorn: There's where I go haywire because dates mean nothing to me, but not very long. About a year after I was married in 1932, it was suggested that I come down and play around with the Grabhorn Press, and wrap packages and make out bill heads. Douglas Watson was leaving. He was doing that sort of thing at that time. I guess it was quite a while actually before Bill Roth and I went in business together. I don't even remember when we did or what year he came to work here.

Teiser: Had he then come to work at the Grabhorn Press several years before the Colt Press started?

Grabhorn: No, just a few months.

Teiser: He was there as an apprentice?

Grabhorn: No, he was just amusing himself during the summer. He was at Princeton then.

Teiser: Was he doing any actual work?

Grabhorn: Well, he set type if you want to call it that. It was just like my brother. They were men who were interested in literature.



Teiser: Your brother is Bill Bissell?

Grabhorn: Yes, I met Bob through Bill. I was interested in books but in a literature-like role. I think that he really loved books. All these men did. They were fascinated by the idea of the physical making of the book, with no intention of being printers necessarily.



## BEGINNING OF THE COLT PRESS

Grabhorn: I think Bill Roth was interested in publishing. He wanted to see how things were put together. That is how we met that summer. Then he suggested that we go into business together, if you want to call it business, and we did. I was getting pretty bored with the whole set-up. And he decided very quickly that he was not cut out to be a printer. As I say, I don't think he ever really wanted to be, but he was getting pretty bored too, so we thought, "Why not have some fun?" And it would have had to be someone like me who did not need the money either, any more than he did, and who had the free time. And I was the kind of person that he could get along with. So we started out bravely.

We took the little hole in the wall on Montgomery Street. That opening party of the Colt Press was something. All jammed into this room about the size of a closet. Trina Grover and I had worked on it. Of course, in those days everybody helped each other out. Nobody had any money, for one thing. I remember we got a desk, a purser's desk, from the



Grabhorn: old Yale. Do you remember the old Yale and the Harvard? Those were Matson ships. And a chair. We still have the chair and I still have the desk. We had that one chair and desk. Trina had just painted them that morning so no one could bump into anything or sit down anywhere. Bill got a gallon of okolehau [laughter], and made reservations at the old Manger for the group. I think Oscar Lewis was there and of course the Grovers, Bill, Bob and I. I forget who else. It was a jolly group. I remember Bill spent the whole evening telephoning Honolulu. [Laughter] We marched into the Manger and marched upstairs there. I remember Bill saying, "I have reservations for Mr. Colt and party." [Laughter] We had gay times in those days. So we rattled around in that little office for quite a while and had an awfully good time.

Then we decided that we should do more and more of our own work, that everything was costing too much money, so we moved into the Commercial Street place. That was a ghastly place. It was huge and I loved it, but there was no heat. We used to freeze to death. We had a big stove that ate up wood and just heated the area right around it. We had this great big



Grabhorn: center room and then there were three little rooms off that.

Teiser: What building was it in?

Grabhorn: 615 Commercial. It is still there, near the corner of Commercial and Montgomery. God, our furniture was something. I remember Harold Seeger had some joke. We were always joking. We used to eat a lot, all of us, at Mario and Frank's on California Street. After Harold had a couple of drinks, he would invariably go into a long dissertation, and so repetitive, over and over again. It had something to do with an owl. Well, I don't know how I got an owl if it was an owl I sent him or a rooster or something. And in return for that he sent me a haystack. It was hard as nails. We had it covered with a piece of burlap. That was our couch. I remember Charley Norris, who did the introduction to McTeague. He marched in there in a severely tailored top coat and homburg. He said, "My God, it's cold in here!" Then he sank down on this haystack. It did look comfortable, but it was just like a rock. He bounded up from that and glared at both of us, Bill and me, and we were grinning from ear to ear. We didn't like him right off anyway.



Grabhorn: Then he sat in the only chair that we had; he sat down in that and said again, "My God, it's cold in here! Isn't there a drink around here somewhere?"

Bill said, "Well, I am sure my partner has some. She usually keeps some sherry around, but I personally don't know where she keeps it." This was one way he figured I would give away my hiding place, you see.

I said, "I have some but I am afraid that it is full of fruit flies," which it was. I was getting it for twenty cents a pint at the corner. I claimed that it was too cold to work without something. I was just beginning to discover the joys of alcohol as the solution to all men's problems, because that was a drinking crowd.

Norris stomped out of there in a rage. He said, "God damnedest outfit I've ever seen! [Laughter] The next time I see your father, Roth, I'll have a thing or two to tell him, I'll tell you." He stomped down the stairs leaving us in hysterics.

We had some sort of paid help. Helga Wolski worked for us for a while. That was Will and Alice Wolski's daughter. I don't know who she married or where she is now. She was a delight. She was an



Grabhorn: honor student and very precocious. She was over at Mills then. I don't know how old she was, maybe fourteen or something. She just loved this, wasn't good for much, but it was nice having her around.

I remember, who was the man?--Wolfgang van Hagan, is it, the writer who wrote an introduction to Melville's The Incantadas, and also something else. He was also very, very competent. With a homburg. He had absolutely no humor. If I had been on the other end of it I would have thought that he was simply funny. He marched in and Helga had just soaped down the linoleum, and he took a terrific flyer. [Laughter] I don't think he was very happy about that, because it struck us as a funny thing. It was a kind of a Mack Sennett comedy with Helga and me trying to help him up, helpless with laughter and slipping ourselves on this soapy floor. He was outraged too. He said, "If I ever get on my feet, I am going to get out of here so Goddamned fast. What kind of an outfit is this anyway?" Well, he had come on his own because he had a manuscript that he wanted us to publish, so we didn't feel too bad. Bill said it had been rejected by every publisher in the country; we were the last resort.



## PARTICIPANTS AND FRIENDS

Grabhorn: Bill had certain ideas about just exactly what he wanted to print. Those were very, very gay and good days, and, as I say, everyone was enormously helpful and kind and efficient. Harold Seeger was so agreeable and so generous. He was very, very helpful to the Colt Press. He, for instance, hand set The Jane Austen Prayers. Bob was going to do it. It had to be done beautifully because it was set in capitals and it had to be done just right.

Teiser: All capitals!

Grabhorn: Oh yes. Capitals have to be cut in, you know. Otherwise they don't look right. I think that was Perpetua, Gill's type. Where you have A's, where one of the legs breaks away from either direction, then you have a big space. For instance a "T" will do the same thing. A good printer--we don't do it as a rule--but a very meticulous printer will cut into a "T"--otherwise the next letter seems to be far away from it, you see--so that the letter fits inside. He did this. He worked like a fiend. Bob was sick and couldn't do it, and Harold took this over and did. He was of inestimable



Grabhorn: help to us--did it out of generosity and kindness, and did very skillful, careful work.

We had an awful lot of help, both Bill and I. Unlike most volunteer help, these are all competent, knowledgeable men. Paul Aller was one. He worked at Johnck and Seeger then. I think he was later a partner of Harold Seeger's. He will probably take over that business now entirely. I can't say that Lawton Kennedy was not helpful except that Lawton charged for everything and I don't count that. Harold definitely was, and Paul Aller was. Although Aller, by the same token, was such a strong union man that he wouldn't touch a piece of type in my place. He would stand there and watch me really sweat. But nevertheless he was extremely helpful in that he taught me a great deal. He taught me about lock-up and make-up and all those things. Evidently that did not interfere with his principles. He would show me as he went about the work, why he was doing this and why that. What was the way to measure. I had never seen measuring by a piece of paper. Bob usually uses a rule, which is not as accurate, and this piece of paper was faster if you want to center your pages on



Grabhorn: the form. Things like that he would show me, but he would never let me touch anything. If I did, he would stop and start hitting me over the head. But those were still the days when the unions were fighting for their lives. He was careful.

Teiser: Who was Jane Swinerton?

Grabhorn: She was with us for a very short time. She was Alfred Swinerton's daughter. That was Swinerton and Walberg, contractors. She was a friend of Roth's, part of that group from Woodside. She was at loose ends too. I think she invested five hundred dollars in the Colt Press. Bill bought her off shortly after that. She didn't take much of an active part, but we had a lot of fun together. She helped me wrap packages and address announcements and that sort of thing. Of course, I had very little to do except to amuse myself, because Bob took over the design naturally. Harris set up the type. I didn't even set up much of the type.

Teiser: Harris?

Grabhorn: Yes, Mackenzie and Harris.



## EDITORIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Teiser: What actual function was Bill Roth's then?

Grabhorn: He was the editor.

Teiser: He read all the manuscripts?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Did he have the last say about them?

Grabhorn: Well, neither of us had the last say about anything [laughter], but he did about the later books. But with the first ones, when we just wanted to get established a little bit, we played it very safe. Our first book was Lola Montez. Oscar (Lewis) gave us that manuscript.

Teiser: He actually gave it to you?

Grabhorn: Oh yes. We did not pay for many. Very few, and certainly not in the beginning. He was our first editorial board, Oscar. Well, he suggested other titles. Carroll Hall's The Terry-Broderick Duel. We printed very few copies and we sold them right around here, just to get our bearings more or less.

Teiser: I think the data on how many copies of each book you printed, and so forth, is in the 1956 Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Typographic Work of Jane Grabhorn.



Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Do you want to say how much money Roth put into the Colt Press?

Grabhorn: I think ten thousand dollars, to start. Probably in all nearer thirty thousand.

Teiser: How far could you go on that now?

Grabhorn: You couldn't go far then really, but we broke even. We did very well. We fell on our face financially with McTeague. You see, the publication date of that was the first blackout in San Francisco. It came out right after Pearl Harbor. That did it.

Teiser: Do I remember a story that you had a party set to launch it the night of a blackout?

Grabhorn: We had it and that was the first blackout, yes.

Teiser: In the middle of the party?

Grabhorn: Yeah, but we thought it was a bombing, that the Japanese were on the way over. It was at Courvoisier Galleries. Very nice assembly, nice party.

Teiser: The next day, I suppose people had other things on their minds.

Grabhorn: Definitely; they weren't running out to buy McTeague.

Teiser: I think Albert Sperisen said that was your own book.

Grabhorn: Yes. There were two pieces of Americana that I



Grabhorn: wanted to reprint--one was McTeague and the other was Sister Carrie. I still wish I could do that. Bill and I still laugh about it. The last time I saw Bill, he said, "Let's go back into business again."

I said, "All right, let's start out with Sister Carrie." [Laughter]

"Oh, no," he said, "we will not!"

After he had let me have my head in the field I knew, which was more or less deluxe books and reprints or Californiana, then he went ahead with his projects. Not all of them but a great many of the books were printed in New York then.

Teiser: In general, the first were printed here and then the second group in New York?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Wolff did some?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: What contribution did Albert Sperisen make to the Colt Press?

Grabhorn: His enthusiasm mostly, but he did many tangible things. He did the jacket, for instance, for The Colossus of Maroussi; he designed a big blue and



Grabhorn: white striped jacket. And pasted up The Gold Rush Song Book: a finicky painstaking work. And the jacket for The Grand Piano. Lawton did most of the printing, of course. That was a continual struggle, Lawton being what he is.

Teiser: Was he temperamental?

Grabhorn: He was opinionated. While a very good mechanic, his and my ideas about what constituted good printing differed. You can not get the kind of printing that I wanted on a cylinder press, although they say John Henry Nash did. But I do not believe you get the impression. With some of those first books it was a continuous battle, with the no impression and the flooding of the ink. Of course, Lawton considered me a complete know-nothing. Though I was, at the same time, I had Bob back of me, who was not a know-nothing. I had been brought up to know good printing.

Teiser: Kennedy was working with Johnck and Seeger then?

Grabhorn: Yes, he had his press in their shop. Seeger was doing the make-up on the books. Harris was setting them up for the most part. Bob was doing the design, doing experimental designs at the Grabhorn Press, and, where necessary, using their type. Many



Grabhorn: people were helpful. Joe Bransten was enormously helpful.

Teiser: How did he help?

Grabhorn: Just by his interest and his enthusiasm, cheering us on.

Teiser: Joseph Henry Jackson?

Grabhorn: He was terrific, absolutely terrific. He gave us all kinds of publicity. He went all out. I had lunch with him at least once a week. He could not have been nicer and kinder or more helpful or more interested. He was tremendously interested.

Mallette (Dean) did most of our art work.

Teiser: Was he at the time, or had he been, an apprentice here?

Grabhorn: No, he never was. He came here and worked as an artist but he had done work for the Grabhorns and that is how I knew about him.



## BINDING AND TYPESETTING

Grabhorn: (William) Wheeler, of course, bound the books, but that was purely mechanical.

Teiser: Wheeler filled a place here that has not been filled since?

Grabhorn: That's right. It is too bad that he did not hang on. It was just a one man bindery; he was a good binder. He was not a creative binder in any way, but he was thoroughly reliable except toward the end.

Teiser: Is there anyone who fills his place now?

Grabhorn: No, the closest would be the Schuberts and they are dreadfully expensive. I don't think that they are in a class with him although they think so. They think they are much better.

Teiser: Perry Davis?

Grabhorn: I don't think that he is a born craftsman. Also he has expanded too much. He uses a lot of machinery. I don't think that he ever did have a feeling for it. I think he bound Carl Wheat's books, the big map books, but we have never used him to speak of.

Teiser: Can you characterize Wheeler?

Grabhorn: He was a working man who was good with his hands.



Grabhorn: When he came to work for the Grabhorns, which was long before my time, he had to be taught everything.

Teiser: Did he actually work as an employee of the Grabhorns for a time?

Grabhorn: Yes, for a long time. Then he went out on his own. For a long time he had his bindery at Johnck and Seeger's. He worked on my books and whatever else came his way. Then he moved into a little loft. Eventually, I think, he worked from his home. As an individual he was not admirable, but as a craftsman he was. He was an uneducated man, good in his job.

Teiser: You say that Harris set a good deal of the type.

Grabhorn: Yes, we had a lot of type set on Monotype. Then when I began to set up things like Kamehameha and books like that, I would buy the metal from him. I bought a lot of Centaur. I began to set my own books where they were fine books. Gollan did some on the Linotype, but I don't know how many, very few.

Teiser: Was this Gordon or his father, A. C. Gollan?

Grabhorn: His father. Of course, that was a close little group, you know. We more or less drifted into having our work done by the people who worked for the Grabhorn Press, or whom we met through Johnck and Seeger.



Grabhorn: Bill Millerick sewed all our books.

Teiser: He sewed the books that Wheeler finished?

Grabhorn: Yes, you can't sew five hundred books by hand unless you want to take the rest of the year off. They were all sewed by machine just as most Grabhorn books are. Millerick has always done all our work. Harold Seeger hated him, but Harold did not do much book work, you see. All these people, you know, they wanted you to use their people. There was a constant battle--take your work away from Millerick. I was not about to just because Harold did not like him. I knew him to be honest which was the rarest trait in a book-binder. He was careful too, so it did not matter what his personality was. Nobody ever did as good work as Millerick--machine work. It was a little shop.

Now we go to Cardoza if there is not anybody else; but he is too big.

Teiser: Were there others who made particular contributions?

Grabhorn: Sherwood Grover, of course, he was a friend. He was working for the Grabhorns. Trina, his wife, the same thing. Any hand setting that had to be done, like in The Gold Rush Song Book. Sherwood spent endless



Grabhorn: hours taking the proofs from which the plates were made for the music. Things like that were really invaluable, even if you had a lot of money. People who could pitch in and do things. Alfred Kennedy, I remember, when I was making up The Epicure in Imperial Russia, he dropped into our shop. That was when we were on Commercial Street. He was watching me fumble around. I was setting up the heads and the recipes. He being an adept type setter, he just took over. People would do those things.

I'll tell you someone else who was awfully nice, and I couldn't have paid her anything to speak of--Polly Black. She was then Polly Bosworth. She did all the work on The Gold Rush Song Book.

Teiser: What work?

Grabhorn: Well, she drew the music. We set up the words in type, but she drew all the music. I think she and her friend--that was their compilation. That was their idea and they got all those songs together. That was a successful book. I mean it sold.

These people, as I say, they did these things for the love of it. Of course, you had to be able to afford to do it; still I know a lot of people who



Grabhorn: won't: "I came up the hard way, so what the hell."

As I said, we were slightly handicapped in a way by everybody's thinking that we were millionaires; that we did not need the money, that we were just amusing ourselves, so why not charge the most?

Teiser: I suppose no matter how much money you had had, you would not have had it differently, would you?

Grabhorn: No, you could not have gotten a nicer bunch of people or a more knowledgeable group. It was a lovely period for everyone. Everybody was cooperative. The paper salesman would come in and work out my problems with me. We would sit around and be friends. We were friends, all of us.

Teiser: Where were your offices?

Grabhorn: First we were at 617 Montgomery. Then we moved to 615 Commercial. Then we moved back to 617 Montgomery.

Teiser: What did you have, just an office room?

Grabhorn: We had a bigger place the second time we moved, to 617 Montgomery.

Teiser: Did you yourself do any actual work on the books?

Grabhorn: I did after we got to Commercial Street, yes. Then I had my own stone and big proof press which we subsequently sold to Jim Hart, the one that he is still



Grabhorn: printing things on. It was a Reliance press, a big hand press. I had lots of type. I bought a lot of Centaur. Then I began to do more and more of my own work. I would have done it all if I could have found a pressman and had I known then what I do now, I would have done all the work right there in the shop, like the Grabhorns--the binding for instance and, with the help of my associates, I could have done the hand setting, making-up, and had a printer, the way the Grabhorns did. That is the only way that you can survive doing fine books. If you have to start paying prices the way we did, Kennedy's prices and Johnck and Seeger's, then you just can't continue.

Teiser: But is there time enough in the world to do all that?

Grabhorn: Sure, the Grabhorns do, but you have to know how to do an awful lot yourself, or have good friends.

Teiser: The binding is such an economic hazard.

Grabhorn: That's right. If I could do that, I would not hesitate. I do now, as I have for the last fifteen or twenty years for the Grabhorn Press.



## PRODUCTION EAST AND WEST

Teiser: How long did you have the Colt Press work done here in San Francisco?

Grabhorn: Up until item number 19 in the Catalogue. This was the first Colt Press book to be produced on the east coast. It was The Pragmatic Test by Parkes, published in 1941. Then we still did some here. We did The Epicure in Imperial Russia. That again was five hundred copies that we could do here.

Teiser: Was that number about your top limit?

Grabhorn: Yes. Then we did the poems of Don Stanford and The Helmsman and The Wife of Martin Guerre and McTeague here. Then we went back to New York for item 26, The Grand Piano. The Last Man I did here at the Grabhorn Press in 1943. I did The Old Pacific Capital here and The Indians of California. All these were done here, but at the Grabhorn Press. The rest of these books here from Weldon Kees' The Last Man, number 28, on 'til the end. That was the first book that we did at the Grabhorn Press, when Bill was away and we moved in here. The rest of them were done here at the Grabhorn Press.



Teiser: So it shifted entirely when they started to be done here?

Grabhorn: Yes, but, of course, you must understand that, technically speaking, we can be said to have done our own work even in that first period because, for instance, if you hire a compositor and a printer and a book binder and they are all working for you, you are responsible for that work whether you actually are doing it by hand or not. You have got to direct every step of the way. The fact that you just are not actually at the machine is a technicality that is usually considered not terribly important. The commercially produced books, I suppose, in the east on the large scale there, have really no choice for a lot of reasons. You are still the one who is responsible though.

Teiser: How did you handle books produced in the east? Did you send layouts?

Grabhorn: Yes, and page size, but there you are limited because those printing plants are using big presses. You have to use big sheets of paper and you are limited in what kind of types you can get on the machine.

Teiser: How about paper?



Grabhorn: Paper is the same thing; you don't have a choice even if you have the money. As I say, you don't have the choice of faces, if you are using the Linotype, or even if you are using the Monotype for that matter.

Teiser: Why did you go east to have work done?

Grabhorn: It was a lot cheaper.

Teiser: In the period when you were working here, were you breaking even?

Grabhorn: I would say so. Just about, maybe. You see all those union prices are high. Somebody like Lawton Kennedy was charging me for the labels for a batch of books. When you are working here at the Grabhorn Press, that is something that you don't consider. Now Harold was always pretty fair. Lawton, I think, had the idea that I was in business with a very rich man and the sky was the limit. I don't say that he was unfair, but he charged me for everything. It is awfully hard to make money that way, unless you can charge a lot for your books and we did not have the reputation.

Teiser: No, I think one of the things about that publishing venture that was so unusual was that you were publishing such fine books at such low prices.



Grabhorn: That was our idea and we realized that it would take us a little while to get going. We were prepared and able to wait. Neither one of us had to make a living. Since we didn't, this was an ideal chance.

Teiser: How did you do financially on books that went east to be produced?

Grabhorn: For one thing, we were in a different market entirely. That is a different world. It wasn't until just before the last that Bill began to realize, for instance, that we would have to have a distributor. We needed somebody like Jim Nourse. That is what Sherwood Grover is doing nowadays. He is with Hand Associates. They tour all around this western territory, far north and far south and I don't know how far east they go, pretty far; that is their job. If we had known somebody like that, we would have turned over our books to them. We did not realize that so we were counting on the same kind of distribution system that we were using before--our mailing list and hoping for an eastern market, but doing little or no advertising, with no salesmen. You just cannot do it in that way.

Teiser: Did you come out with remainders?



Grabhorn: Oh yes. Now Andy, Andrew Hoyem, has been through the same thing. He says, "Well, of course, I can sell so many hundred books of this Olsen book. Charles Olsen is the best known man of his sort in the country." But by whom?

Teiser: Who is Charles Olsen?

Grabhorn: Yes, I did not want to say that. If I had said that, it would have been exactly as if somebody had said to us in the 'thirties, "Who the hell is Ezra Pound?" I could have pointed out to him that in the 1920's and the 1930's even Ezra Pound could not have sold two hundred or three hundred copies, especially at twenty-five dollars.

These were things that, had the war not happened, I think we could have straightened out eventually. Our friends and the people that we knew were ideal for the little fine press, but they did not know very much about this sort of thing either really. Also there was still a depression when we started out.

Of course, we had very little trouble selling these little books that were printed here. They were nice books in the usual Grabhorn Press style.

I'd say to Bill "Who the hell is Paul Goodman?



Grabhorn: Why do you want to do this?"

Bill would say, "Well, everybody knows who Paul Goodman is!"

I'd say, "I don't know who Paul Goodman is."

Bill is only five or six years younger than I am but he was more in that intellectual world. Of course, the poetry booklets failed. Everybody said there would be no problem at all selling them. Well, the heck there wasn't.

I am told now that the value of all these books has increased because they were remaindered and nobody saved them. To get together a complete collection of Colt Press books is not easy. Duncan Olmsted told me that. Nobody saved them, like the old Japanese prints a hundred years ago.

Teiser: Does anybody ever make money publishing poetry?

Grabhorn: I suppose so, if you can put it out cheaply, but it is something that I would be awfully wary of. Maybe you could with Edgar Guest or Edna St. Vincent Millay or some of these popular people. As we know real poetry, I don't think so.



## ECONOMICS OF FINE BOOK PRINTING

Teiser: Were any of the Colt Press books subsidized?

Grabhorn: You mean printed for somebody else? No, we never did that. Again we did not have to. Most of the Grabhorn Press books are. Have to be. But here we were like Andy. Andy, I think, had ten thousand dollars and it is all gone--trying to put out poetry and broadsides and thinking "Well, if the work is good enough and everybody knows the author, they will buy it."

Teiser: I suppose there is always room for one very good printer like Andrew Hoyem.

Grabhorn: I think that you have to have something that Andy hasn't got. Also, I think that you have to do all your own work. The minute you begin to farm stuff out, you're sunk, that's all. The Grabhorns for years and years and years did everything. They paid a binder and they paid Bill Hewitt and they always had some youngster who was willing to come in there and work for virtually nothing. But by and large, they were running their own press, setting their own type, and to all intents and purposes doing their own binding.



Teiser: You do the binding?

Grabhorn: Well, I do now, but it was William Wheeler before me.

Teiser: Have they always had some lithographic illustrations done outside?

Grabhorn: Yes, and as I say, many of their books have actually been printing jobs for some publisher or a privately printed job.

Teiser: But the Colt Press was just an independent publishing venture?

Grabhorn: Yes, it was. Bob and I did a heck of a lot more work than is apparent by the record, like making-up a book and setting up the headings, and the half-titles or the title page.

Teiser: Until McTeague they were small books physically?

Grabhorn: Yes, we never did any really big ones.

Teiser: What about George R. Stewart's book on Thomes?

Grabhorn: That was not a small book; it was bigger.

Teiser: I did not realize that Bob Grabhorn had as much to do with the Colt Press as he did.

Grabhorn: Oh yes. I mean Bill was no idiot. He didn't pick me just because he thought I was beautiful. He wanted Bob [laughter]; there was no question about that at all. I was, at the start at least, a friend and a



Grabhorn: companion, somebody to laugh with and fight with and a direct contact with Robert, you see. So we had really the use of the Grabhorn Press too. We could experiment with types, and set up sample pages.

Teiser: When you sent work east, did you set up sample pages then?

Grabhorn: Pretty much. I think we always did.

Teiser: I suppose no one who prints is used to making layouts just with a pencil.

Grabhorn: Sperisen may have been very helpful on that. I don't know; I think Bob knows as much about it. Usually it's a very rough sketch. Frequently I would sit down, like with The Grand Piano, and say, "I want a squarish kind of a book. I'm awfully sick of these 6" by 9" books. I always did hate them. I want a squarish book." And I set up that double title page. At that time it was quite unusual. I was sick and tired of the looks of these books, these commercial books.

Teiser: Did you set that actually in type?

Grabhorn: Yes.

Teiser: Did you have much distribution outside of this area of the books done here?



Grabhorn: Los Angeles, of course. The later books, yes. Then people like Gotham in New York and Duschnes and a few dealers like that would buy our books. The university libraries; but then you can't count on that.

We found it easier to deal with the book sellers as far as possible. Now I don't know that I would go after them. You have to take a walloping cut there. A forty per cent discount. Here at the Grabhorn Press we only give twenty-five per cent, but even so our best bet is the Book Club of California because that is a non-profit organization and they can afford to pay us somewhere near the cost of putting out a book.

We must have sold a lot of Colt Press books to individuals because I remember these staggering, hysterical groups going to the post office there in Chinatown laden with books--wrapping them, labeling them.

Teiser: Those sales came as a result of direct mail?

Grabhorn: Yes, we used the Book Club's mailing list. How we got it, I don't know. Probably the Grabhorn Press--that is right, because they were keeping one up. I did until about fifteen or twenty years ago; then I stopped because now the Book Club has made a rule.



Grabhorn: You advertise in their quarterly and you can use their mailing list. Before that I always had the use of it. It was always a lot more work than it was worth. That is how we started, and we kept it up.

Teiser: I remember you had several little catalogs.

Grabhorn: Yes, and we had a little News Letter. I have forgotten what we called it.

Teiser: You were running a promotion factory as well as a publishing business?

Grabhorn: I don't know what we were doing, but we were amusing ourselves at any rate. And we didn't do too badly. The book dealers were awfully nice and they were cooperative. Jack Newbegin gave us a fantastic boost. He became a very good friend of Bob's. He was a man of a great deal of animosity. If he liked you, okay. If he didn't, he was an implacable enemy. I am sure that is why he took so many copies of our books, just to annoy Ed, whom he hated. He would say, "I'll take 150 of those." But this was merely his way of slapping Ed in the face. He was a great help to us but not for the right reason. We didn't care, though, what reason it was.

Teiser: He sold them didn't he?



Grabhorn: That's right. Of course, he was a master salesman. Once he decided he wanted to push something, he just told people. He had terrific fun. "You want to get in on the ground floor, you get these books. You didn't buy Grabhorn books when you could have gotten them cheap. I'm telling you, and I know something about this business, you get these books and you get them now." He would move them like eggs. Just as easy. If he hadn't liked us, or had not had this particular vendetta, he would have easily just forgotten us, or said, "Don't come in here with your Goddamned books; I don't want to see them in here." He wouldn't hesitate to tell anybody and everybody how lousy they were.

As I say, that was still during the depression and people couldn't afford to gamble. We wouldn't send books out on consignment. It was one of Roth's principles; don't ask me why, but he would not. He said, for one thing, that he didn't want to go through all that bookkeeping. He would rather have them there and intact and remaindered en bloc at some future date than have them floating all around. I think he was right since we did not have to.



Grabhorn: After I moved out here to Sutter Street and Bill and I decided that we would have to call the whole thing off, we remaindered a great many books to the Argonaut Bookshop, Bob Haines of all people. How many he has still got left, I don't know. But he bought a great deal of them, just as Dawson's always bought. I can sell Dawson just about any remainder and any quantity of Grabhorn books. Whereas a man like Magee, although he specializes in Grabhorn books, doesn't have the capital, I guess, or the space, but Dawson will always buy Grabhorn books. And usually Colt Press books too.

Teiser: Did you still come out even except for your time with the Colt Press?

Grabhorn: Bill would know. I don't think so, but he could answer those questions. I didn't have anything to do with that end of it.

Teiser: It would be wonderful to start it again, wouldn't it?

Grabhorn: Yes, but now he has bigger interests and wider scope. He has an interest in Atheneum Publishers.

Teiser: Has he? Well, this would hardly cross with that.

Grabhorn: No, it wouldn't, but we are hardly in a position now. We have no pressman so we would be right back where we started.



Teiser: Who is the current Grabhorn Press apprentice?

Grabhorn: Tom Harrison, another rich man's son.

Teiser: It seems that many young men who have done interesting things have been apprentices here or have worked here.

Grabhorn: Bob is going to organize a club called The Old Boys of the Grabhorn Press. We were going over it with Richard Elkus. Not that they have gone on to be printers or publishers or anything of that sort, but it is a nice group.

Teiser: Was Richard Elkus one of them too?

Grabhorn: Evidently, long before I came along, he worked at the Grabhorn Press for a while. But you can't say that he worked. What did he do? Sweep up or feed the press or something like that.

Teiser: But anyway he got a little innoculated. Maybe it is a part of the culture of San Francisco.

Grabhorn: Bob wants to have a reunion. Dick Elkus says he will pay for the first dinner. I said somebody is going to have to pay to get Alain Guernez from Paris, pay his fare.

Teiser: Who?

Grabhorn: He was a Frenchman who worked for us for about a year. Furthermore, if he came to the reunion he



Grabhorn: would demand pay for all the time he was gone from his job in Paris. [Laughter] Otherwise, most of the Old Boys are pretty much available.

Teiser: Have you used the Colt Press imprint recently for things that really had no connection with the original Colt Press enterprise?

Grabhorn: Yes, on a couple of things that I have done for the Book Club, they have wanted that imprint. Mainly I think they figure they will get a Grabhorn book cheaper.

Teiser: Who does the imprint belong to now?

Grabhorn: Me. I am going to do a book for them, their spring book, with the Colt Press imprint.\*

Teiser: What is it to be?

Grabhorn: Something Franklin Walker wrote about the early California writers in Carmel, the Monterey Bay area. Probably a good text; Jim Hart is supposed to bring it in this week. I'll hand set that. Or if I can't do it my own way and get any fun out of it, why not let Bob do it? He does it easily. I'll do the drudgery.

I can still do things on my own for my fun. I said timidly this morning, "I think I would like to

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\*The Colt Press did not do this book. See Introduction.



Grabhorn: do a Christmas card."

"No, no, you can't do that."

"I said, "I'd like to use that Maynard Dixon Indian again. I've got a poem all ready."

He said, "No, let's make something typographic."

I thought, "Oh, boy, here I go." I said, "People like pictures. How many people know what perfect typography is? You and all your sashaying around." So I'll probably abandon that idea.

Once in a while I break loose, like with this projected cat book. I wanted to do it all on my own. I set a whole bunch of pages. I think they are lovely. [Laughter] Bob would not allow it, not on your life.

"Why can't I use this kind of type?"

He said, "Well, you just can't, that's all!"

Teiser: Maybe you will hold out.

Grabhorn: No, because he would figure his reputation was at stake. You can see why and understand that, why he would want a professional job. That is why I haven't done more books myself since I have been here. They aren't really mine if they are taken out of my hands so what is the point. If I do anything now, it has to be something just for a joke.



**PARTIAL INDEX**



Aller, Paul, 11  
Atheneum Publishers, 36  
Argonaut Bookshop, 36

Bissell, William (Bill), 4  
Black, Polly Bosworth, 21  
Book Club of California, 33, 38  
Bransten, Joseph (Joe), 17

Cardoza (bookbinders), 20  
Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Typographic Work  
of Jane Grabhorn, 13, 24  
Colossus of Maroussi, The, 15  
Colt Press, 1, 3; beginnings, 5-9; participants, 10-17;  
binding and typesetting, 18-23; production, 24-29;  
economics of printing, 30-39

Davis, Perry, 18  
Dawson's (Bookshop), 36  
Dean, Mallette, 17

Elkus, Richard, 37  
Epicure in Imperial Russia, The, 21, 24

Fields, George, 2

Gold Rush Song Book, The, 16, 20-21  
Gollan, A. C., 19  
Goodman, Paul, 28-29  
Grabhorn, Edwin (Ed), 1, 34  
Grabhorn Press, 3, 16, 19-20, 23, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32,  
33, 35-37  
Grabhorn, Robert (Bob), 1-2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 16,  
31-32, 34, 37-39  
Grand Piano, The, 16, 24, 32  
Grover, Sherwood, 2, 6, 20, 27  
Grover, Trina, 2, 5-6, 20  
Guernez, Alain, 37



Haines, Robert (Bob), (Argonaut Bookshop), 36  
Hall, Carroll, The Terry-Broderick Duel, 13  
Hand Associates, 27  
Harris, Carroll (Mackenzie and Harris, Inc.),  
(typographers), 12, 16, 19  
Harrison, Tom, 37  
Hart, Professor James D. (Jim), 22  
Helmsman, The, 24  
Hewitt, William (Bill), 30  
Hoyem, Andrew, 28, 30

Incantadas, The, 9  
Indians of California, The, 24

Jackson, Joseph Henry, 17  
Jane Austen Prayers, The, 10  
Johnck and Seeger (compositors), 11, 16, 19, 23  
Jumbo Press, 1-3

Kamehameha, 19  
Kees, Weldon, The Last Man, 24  
Kennedy, Alfred, 21  
Kennedy, Lawton, 11, 16, 23, 26

Last Man, The, 24  
Lewis, Oscar, 5, 13  
Lola Montez, 13

Mackenzie and Harris (typographers), 12  
Magee, (David), (bookseller), 36  
McTeague, 7, 14-15, 24, 31  
Melville, Herman, The Incantadas, 9  
Millerick, William (Bill), (bookbinder), 20

Nash, John Henry, 16  
Newbegin, Jack (bookseller), 34-35  
Norris, Charles G. (Charley), 7-8  
Nourse, James (Jim), 27



Old Pacific Capital, The, 24  
Olmsted, Duncan, 29  
Olsen, Charles, 28

Parkes, Henry B., The Pragmatic Test, 24  
Pound, Ezra, 28  
Pragmatic Test, The, 24

Robertson, Dr. John W., 1  
Roth, William (Bill), at Grabhorn Press, 3; at Colt  
Press, 5-15, 27, 28-29, 31-32, 36

Schuberts, The (bookbinders), 18  
Seeger, Harold, 7, 10-11, 20  
Sister Carrie, 15  
Sperisen, Albert, 14-16, 32  
Stanford, Don, poems of, 24  
Stewart, George R., book on Thomas, 31  
Swinerton, Alfred, 12  
Swinerton, Jane, 12

Terry-Broderick Duel, The, 13

van Hagan, Wolfgang, 9

Walker, Franklin, 38  
Watson, Douglas, 3  
Wheat, Carl, 18  
Wheeler, William, 18-19, 31  
Wife of Martin Guerre, The, 24  
Wolff, H. (New York book manufacturer), 15  
Wolski, Helga, 8-9  
Wolski, Will and Alice, 8







# One Woman's Venture Into The World of Fine Printing

By Ruth Teiser and  
Catherine Harrow

THE COLT PRESS of San Francisco has, over the past 18 years, published a remarkably lively and intimate list of books that have interested not only collectors of fine printing but also many people who simply like to read books. Recently a complete run of Colt Press editions has been presented to the Stanford University Library. Now for the first time they are all on public exhibition and will continue to be through April 7.

Jane Grabhorn is the pivotal point of the Colt Press, and the whole enterprise reflects her lively and thoughtful personality. A spirited creative typographer, she has designed all its books and even produced a few single-handed. She is the wife of Robert Grabhorn, partner with Edwin Grabhorn in the Grabhorn Press. About a year after her marriage she started poking around the shop, and this led in due time to the establishment of her one-woman Jumbo Press, the work of which is also

being exhibited at Stanford. The Colt Press itself was started in 1938 when William M. Roth, then a student at Yale, got a summer job at the Grabhorn

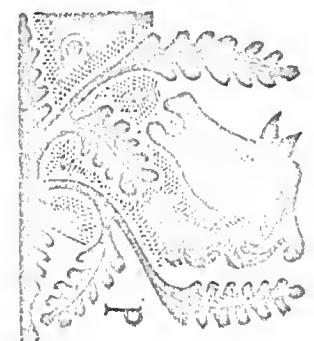
Press and instigated the publishing venture.

It began, Roth has recently written reminiscently, with the aid and encouragement of a group of Jane Grabhorn's friends: Oscar Lewis who wrote the first book; Joseph Henry Jack-son who gave editorial advice; Albert Sperisen whose most recent support has been in the form of helping

arrange the Stanford exhibi-

tion;

Mallette Dean who has done many of the books' illustrations; Jane Swinerton who was for a time the third principal in the Colt Press. Some of the type was set by Gollan and Mac-



Kenzie & Harris, Lawton Kennedy did most of the printing, and Bill Wheeler much of the binding. Later a few volumes were sent east to be produced.

The first book, which set a precedent of Western subject matter skillfully written, was Oscar Lewis's "Lola Montez, The Mid-Victorian Bad Girl in California." It appeared in the autumn of 1938, and between that date and Pearl Harbor 23 more volumes were published. Carroll Hall

wrote a fascinating study of the Broderick-Terry Duel, George R. Stewart a delightful short biography of early California author William Henry Thomas under the title "Take Your Bible in One Hand," Franklin Walker a vivid sketch of Ambrose Bierce, Edmund Wilson a collection of essays on California novelists entitled "The Boys in the Back Room." There were also three pleasant little regional cook books, a volume of poems by Don Stanford, a fine short novel by Janet Lewis, and finally a big illustrated edition of that California literary landmark, Frank Norris's "Mc-

Illustrations from "Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Typographic Work of Jane Grabhorn."



Teague."

"McTeague" was launched at the precise hour of San Francisco's first World War blackout, and it thus became what someone has called a flop destined. With its publication ended, in effect, the first phase of the Colt Press, for Roth went off to serve in the OWI, the war dampened everyone's spirits, and production became difficult.

To keep the Colt Press flags flying, Jane Grabhorn on her own launched a series of California re-prints. They were produced

by the Grabhorn Press for the Colt Press imprint, an arrangement which continues today. The series included little-known works on California by such outlanders as Kipling, DeQuincey, Trollope and Stevenson, and turned out to be immensely popular with book readers and buyers.

To date the Colt Press has published 40 titles, and more continue to come at the rate of one or two a year, as Jane Grabhorn's time allows—for she is also the Grabhorn Press book binder.



# F. Library Gets Rare Books

For more than 30 years Robert Grabhorn, one of the partners in the world famous Grabhorn Press of San Francisco, has been collecting rare and beautiful books related to the history of printing.

Now his collection of 1600 items has been acquired by the San Francisco Public Library, with the aid of the Friends of the Library.

WILLIAM HOLMAN, the city librarian, calls the new acquisition "the most significant collection thus far added to our rare book division."

And Mrs. Carl W. Stern, civic leader and president of the Friends of the Library, says—

"It is of the utmost importance for the future of fine printing and the graphic arts in the Bay Area to have available for study such examples of the art of the book."

Robert Grabhorn began collecting in 1933, not long after his marriage to Martha Jane Bissell . . . who now runs the bindery of the Grabhorn Press. The Grabhorns are not wealthy, having dedicated their lives to quality bookmaking, and Robert's acquisitions were made slowly and shrewdly at relatively low prices.

NEITHER HE nor the library will reveal the price he put on his collection, but it is said to be considerably less than the market value of the items.

The oldest item in the collection is a single leaf of Balbus' *Catholicus*, printed in Germany in 1460. It is sometimes attributed to Gutenberg, one of the first printers in Europe.

There are 119 such "in-



MR. AND MRS. ROBERT GRABHORN  
Of the world famous Grabhorn Press printshop

nabula" in all—books printed prior to 1500 A.D.

THE COLLECTION also includes a copy of the first printed version of Euclid's Elements (1482). Another copy of this same printing was recently acquired by Warren Howell, San Francisco antiquarian book dealer, at Sotheby's, London, for \$7840.

Other items:

Joel Barlow's poem "The Columbiad," printed by Fry and Kammerer, Philadelphia, in 1807; one of the earliest of American fine press books.

A 1502 edition of Dante's

Divine Comedy, printed in the italic type designed by Aldus.

The first printed edition of the plays of Euripedes, printed by Aldus at Venice in 1503.

Edmund Fry's *Pantographia* (London, 1799), a collection of the world's alphabets; described by the publisher (Cooper and Wilson) as "a comprehensive digest of phonology."

VALENTIN HAUY'S 1786 (Paris) "Essay on the Education of the Blind," in which large script type was deeply impressed in the paper: The blind students not

only read imprint with their finger tips, but also prepared the type fonts. The first attempt to print for the blind, antedating Louis Braille's system by nearly half a century.

Parts of Grabhorn Collection will be put on display at the formal presentation ceremonies on the third floor of the Main Library next Wednesday afternoon at 5 o'clock. The exhibit will continue through November.

The library and its Friends have been planning for this major acquisition for several years, ever since Robert Grabhorn, now 65, indicated he wanted the city to have it.

The Grabhorn collection will be added to the Nat Schmulowitz wit and humor collection and the Max Kuhl fine press book collection in the heart of the Rare Book Division, now totalling more than 50,000 items.



